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**Title: The French Colonial Policy in Tunisia between 1920 and 1930 and its
Influence on the Greek Community.**

Abstract

The Greek presence in Tunisia dates back to the middle of the 16th century, when merchants and ex-slaves, once victims of the pirates operating in North Africa, settled primarily in the ports of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. During that period, Tunisia was part of the Ottoman Empire and from 1705, a semi-independent hegemony. The French invasion of North Africa was a crucial point in the Greek community's long presence in Tunisia. The French colonial policy brought tremendous changes in the social life of people residing in multinational Tunisia, including Greeks. The decade between 1920 and 1930 marked a series of reforms in the governmental structures of Tunisia. These events also affected Greek residents in Tunisia. Although they retained their religious identity, their ethnic orientation became directly dependent on these political and social changes, since that is when the majority of Greeks acquired French citizenship. It is important to examine whether this shift was accompanied by a transformation of the Greek national identity and the extent of its influence within the actual Greek community.

Keywords

Tunisia, French colonialism, Greek Diaspora, migration, acculturation

Introduction

Tunisia is located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and the North African coast. For that reason, people of different nationalities, races and religions settled in there. During the 17th and 18th century, the international political and economic conditions caused an increase in human migrations within the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Jews, Greeks and Maltese immigrated to Tunisia which was an import and export trade centre that linked the Ottoman Empire and the Western Europe (Hasiotis, Katsiardi-Hering and Abatzi 2006, 21). The Greeks gradually took under their control the trade between Tunis and the eastern Mediterranean ports, particularly in the lucrative field of grain, olive oil, tobacco, dried figs, alcohol, silk and purple (Clancy-Smith 2010; Poulos 1926, 155). Because of their important role in the economy of Tunisia, they were very close to the local authorities. Moreover, among the Ottoman subjects who lived in Tunis, the Greeks also benefited from the generosity and protection of the Husaynid Dynasty which was established in Tunis in 1705, since the first ruler, Al-Husayn I ibn Ali at – Turki, was an Islamized Greek (Kazdaghli 2007b).

Due to their economic prosperity and the close relationships established with the local Beys, the Greeks preserved their national consciousness until the late 19th century. In 1881, Tunisia transformed into a French protectorate. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the French proceed to the gradual reorganization of the state structures. Those changes influenced the character of the Greek community members. The French policy in Tunisia, which is largely derived from

the competition of the European powers, affected the Greek community of Tunisia which experienced the consequences of the internal political changes. Actually, it was the beginning of a series of reforms in the Greek national identity, a process that lasted until 1956, when Tunisia became an independent country.

The establishment of the French protectorate in Tunisia

Following the Napoleonic Wars and the Treaty of Vienna, Europe gained a favourable position towards the Ottoman Empire which was facing numerous problems, including a loss of territories. European powers urged the Sultan for concessions, trade privileges and the signing of consular treaties that were to lead ultimately to his loss of power over Tunisia. During this period of decline of the Ottoman Empire, Tunisia was a focus of discord for France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Due to its geographical position at the narrowest point of the Mediterranean Sea, those who controlled Tunisia could gain access to the eastern Mediterranean. During this time, Tunisia found it difficult to maintain a policy of neutrality.

In 1831, Al-Husayn II Ibn Mahmud Bey introduced the capitulation system and, as a result, many European consuls and merchants settled in Tunisia. Three years later, Mahmud II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, attempted to curtail the Bey's rule by integrating Tunisia under his jurisdiction. However, France expressed its willingness to protect the alleged 'independence' of Tunisia by any means. The French navy repelled an attack by the Ottoman Fleet. The following year, the French army, based in Algiers, trespassed into Tunisia for various

reasons. This included the definition of a border between Algeria and Tunisia and military missions against what the French termed as terrorists who took refuge in the territory of Tunisia. It is important to note that the French army evacuated Tunisia only after British political pressure. The struggle for Tunisia between Great Britain and France continued until the 1880s. Between 1837 and 1855, Ahmad Bey attempted his own reforms (Lacoste and Lacoste-Dujardin 1991).

After some radical changes in administration, Ahmad Bey reorganised the army and navy and abolished slavery. However, between 1840 and 1843, he imposed several taxes on merchants and brokers in order to fund the military modernisation. At the same time, he built palaces, administrative buildings, camps and forts. It should be noted that the person in charge of state finances of Tunisia was an Islamized Greek from Chios Island, Mustapha Khaznadhar.

Muhammad II (1855-1859) attempted to liberate Tunisia from the European patrons without success. In 1857, under the pressure of European powers and High Port, the Tunisian government was forced to sign the Ahd al Amman treaty (Foundation Agreement) that instituted a series of reforms. According to this treaty, every resident of Tunisia was equal before the law, regardless of their religion or nationality. Furthermore, legislation protected ownership and economic activity and consular courts were established. During the reign of Muhammad III as-Sadiq (1859-1882), Tunisia issued the first constitution in the Arab world that was inspired by the constitutional monarchies of Europe. Although completed in 1860, it was signed only after the approval of the French Emperor. The Tunisian Constitution (Qanun al dawlah) was signed in 1861 declaring judiciary independence. A legislative "Advisory Committee" and a "Grand Council" were also established. In the following years, Europeans

undertook projects such as the railway construction between Tunis and La Goullete, the establishment of postal service and the modernization of a water supply system. These projects were funded by the Tunisian state through several loans. As a result, in 1869, Tunisia declared bankruptcy and an international financial committee composed of French, British and Italian officers took control of the Tunisian economy.

France and Italy initially sought to place Tunisia under their direct control. Italy was the closest European country to the Tunisian coast and Italians formed the largest European community of the country. France also took advantage of its proximity after the conquest of Algeria in 1830. There were also many French officers in the Tunisian army. In the early 1870s, France's involvement in European affairs prevented it from annexing Tunisia. During the Berlin Conference of 1878, European countries agreed to expand their control in Africa. France received the "approval" of the other European states to annex Tunisia, but only after France had accepted British supremacy in Egypt, the integration of Cyprus into the British Empire and the allocation to Britain of major African regions. However, in 1880, Italy disagreed with the Berlin conference decisions since it was involved in the construction of the Tunis to La Goullete railway line. In April 1881, under the pretext of an invasion by Tunisia of Algeria, the French invaded Tunisia and forced the Bey to sign the Treaty of Bardo on May 12th 1881 (Martin 2003, 41-43).

As a result, the Bey was obliged to hand over all economic administration to the French, and undertook to pay all creditors according to existing agreements. Although the state control remained primarily in the Bey's hands, a French minister (*Resident General*) acted as the real governor and represented Tunisia

abroad. In effect, the Treaty of Bardo transformed Tunisia into a French protectorate, despite the objections of Italy.

The French colonial policy

At the time of the establishment of the French protectorate, the population of Tunisia was approximately 1,500,000 people. There almost 20,000 Europeans in the country at that time.—This included 708 French, 7,000 Maltese, 11,000 Italians and 1,200 from other nationalities (Shorrock 1983, 631-651). Tunis was a cosmopolitan city, where people of different nationalities and religions, including Europeans, Arabs and Jews lived in harmony (Woodberry 1914, 30).

Before the arrival of the French, the political system in Tunisia followed the pattern of the established Ottoman administration. The institution of the office of the *caid* was particularly important since it had the status of a provincial governor. In particular, the *caid* was responsible for maintaining order and collecting taxes in areas based on ethnic or geographic criteria. The *caid* was usually the most respected and the wealthiest person within the ethnic community. In addition to *caids*, there were also *cheikhs*, whose administrative authority was limited to a specific district or village. They were appointed by the central government, based on the recommendation of the *caids*. Although the French had established mechanisms of control, they left the field of local government almost intact. Despite the fact that most *caids* and *cheikhs* remained in place, French administration established *contrôleurs civils*. After 1884, besides the Resident General, who was the supreme commander, the *contrôleurs civils* were responsible for supervising the *caids*' decisions. In addition, in 1883, the French legal system

was extended to all of the residents of Tunisia, both French and non-French. This action led to the gradual abolition of consular courts that were set up by European countries over the centuries. The Protectorate also proceeded to transform the field of education. The French Minister of Education became responsible for all schools in Tunisia, including the religious ones. According to Perkins, many officials believed that modern education could set the foundation for the harmonious coexistence of the French with the other ethnic groups of the country. It could serve as a means of communication between the Islamic and the European cultures (Perkins 2004). Shortly after the creation of the Protectorate, the Directorate of Public Education created a unified system for all students in Tunisia in order to bring all of the country's residents closer. French was the language in use in all Franco-Arabic schools, and the curriculum was the same as that of the schools in metropolitan France. The Franco-Arabic schools had more success in rural areas in contrast to the larger cities.

The French leadership promoted the "small French nation of Tunisia", which numbered only 700 people in 1881. Although this artificial nation had a relatively short historical presence, it gradually dominated all socioeconomic activities (Soumille 1994, 197-231). That nation consisted of young people, usually highly educated, who were responsible for most of the important political, administrative or economic affairs of the protectorate. It operated a closed system, accessible only to those willing to become integrated within it. For this reason, it was often in competition with the two dominant ethnic groups that coexisted in Tunisia, the Arabs and the Italians. It is important to remember that, in the first decade of the 20th century, almost 100,000 Italians lived in Tunisia (Alberti Russell 1977, 34-37; Eamonn Gearon 2011, 117 and Bonura 1929, 59).

In order to enhance this Tunisian "French nation", French authorities adopted various initiatives. First, an attempt was made to encourage the settling of their compatriots either directly from France or from Algeria. This was done by offering interest-free loans and grants, so that settlers could purchase land (Kazdaghli 2001). The decree of 25/07/1887 granted all Tunisian residents the right to obtain French citizenship. This tactical granting of citizenship was ineffective, since only 142 persons became French citizens. As a result, the protectorate government inaugurated a different policy: that of integration and cultural assimilation of all ethnic groups (Faucon 1893, 427).

This decision was also supported by the leadership of Catholic Church who played an important role in the various communities of Europeans in Tunisia. Despite the clear separation of church and state in France, the policies of the French protectorate in Tunisia were different. Even the passionate leader of French anti-clericalism, Leon Gambetta, did not hesitate to declare that "if the French priests are facilitating the spread not only of religion, but also of French culture, then there is no reason to put obstacles in their work." Actually, such tactics were partially responsible for the assimilation of the Maltese community. The policy of integration into the "French nation" was implemented by mechanisms such as the naturalisation of members of other small European communities who lived in Tunisia, e.g. not only the Catholic Maltese but even the orthodox Greeks. In the following years, they would also attract Europeans who settled in Tunisia during the inter-war period, such as the Russians who arrived in 1917 and the Poles who settled in 1920 (Kazdaghli 1998).

Nevertheless, the French protectorate leadership had to face the major issue of the relationship to the Italian state, which had maintained its claim to the region.

The Italian interest in Tunisia was strong, not only due to the large Italian community, but also due to Tunisia's geopolitical place in the Mediterranean Sea (Baedeker 1911, 332). In 1911, the population of Tunis consisted of 115,000 Arabs, 22,500 Jews, 41,000 Italians, 14,000 French and 5,400 Maltese. When the First World War ended, the French authorities adopted an aggressive policy of cultural assimilation towards all ethnic groups who lived in Tunisia. At the same time, French policies caused an Italian reaction. On the one hand, Italy was closer to North Africa and had already conquered neighbouring Libya. The Italian government showed a particular interest in Tunisia, where thousands of Italian citizens lived. By 1921, there was a total of 84,799 Italians, 54,476 French, 12,520 Maltese and 12,520 people from other nations living in Tunisia. On November 8th, 1921, President Alexandre Millerand and Prime Minister Aristide Briand signed a decree that abolished all previous grants of citizenship rights in Tunisia. All foreign nationals who were born in the French protectorate of Tunisia and whose parents had also been born in Tunisia would be considered French nationals. The "Tunisian issue" intensified on May 25th, 1923, when a new law on naturalisation was proposed by the Prime Minister Maurice Colrat and the Minister of Defense Andre Maginot (Shorrock 1983, 636). It set a specific timetable for the naturalisation of all foreign nationals. When the proposed naturalisation law took effect on December 20th, 1923, after the final vote in the French Senate, it highlighted the distrust and resentment of the Italian community that was concerned about its future.

According to the annual reports on the rate of naturalisation submitted by the French General Governor of Tunisia, Lucien Saint, there was an upward trend in the 1920s. Between 1891 and 1923, 4,128 acts of naturalization were recorded,

of which 2,632 were for Italians (Shorrock 1983, 638). In 1923, 526 Italians became French citizens and in 1924 their number increased to 1,025. By the end of 1927, the annual rate of naturalisation reached 2,500-3,000. The French colonial policy came to a head in the early 1930s, when the French community managed to slightly exceed the Italian one. In 1931, there were 91,427 French citizens and 91,178 Italians.

The influence of the French policy on the Greek community of Tunisia.

The concentration of merchants at several Mediterranean ports, such as Alexandria and Tunis, which gradually transformed into ethnic communities, is a complex issue. The religious differentiation was initially the main factor that determined the social life and activities of each ethnic community. Gradually, because the settlers lived in heterodox surroundings, a series of other matters began to influence their lives. The main issues were related to language or national identity. This was the result of coexistence and interaction with other nationalities.

As we have already seen, the main characteristic of the French policy was the mass naturalisation of all foreign nationals. Before focusing on that policy's effects on the Greek community in Tunisia, it is useful to look at the demographic status of the Greek community during that specific period. The censuses of the Greek consulate in Tunis provide a snapshot of the Greek population at that time. There are several shortcomings that make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. This is because the recordings of the Greeks listed on the census are not complete since some of them were not registered and a few had acquired a different

citizenship. In addition, some censuses recorded only adult men. Based on the municipal archives and the census that took place in 1889, 243 Greeks lived in Tunis¹. At the beginning of the 20th century (1905), the French archives indicated there were 690 Greeks (Ministère des affaires Etrangères 1905, 401). In 1906, according to the official census of the Greek consulate, 700 Greeks resided in Tunis (Kazdaghli 2007a, 342). There were an additional 14 people who lived in Bizerte and four in Sousse. At the end of the first decade of the 20th century, official reports of the French protectorate are a valuable source of information on the demographic picture of the Greek community. Actually, the Greek population in Tunisia increased from 697 in 1907 to a total of 813 in 1914 (Ministère des affaires Etrangères 1907, 7; Régence de Tunis 1913, 34).

The impact of the French policy, contained in the decrees of 1887 to 1910, would have been negligible for the Greek community. This is because only 36 Greeks acquired French citizenship during this period (Ministère des affaires Etrangères 1910, 18). Things changed significantly at the end of the second decade of the 20th century. According to the records of the French protectorate, a total of 224 Greeks acquired French citizenship in 1920 (Ministère des affaires Etrangères 1921, 172). This is a very large total at a time when the Tunisian Greek community had a total of 920 people (Ministère des affaires Etrangères 1921, 172).

In the following years, although we have no precise data on the demographic profile of the community since registries only include Greek citizens,

¹ Archive of the Greek Embassy in Tunis, "Greek citizens' registry of 1889." This article is the result of an extensive research made on the archives of the Greek community in Tunis, the diplomatic archives of the Greek Embassy in Tunis and the archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry in Athens. Finally, for the ecclesiastical affairs we used the archives of the Patriarchate of Alexandria which are located in Athens.

it is possible to assess the naturalization phenomenon. According to data supplied by Kazdaghi, in 1926, the Greek community of Tunis had 646 citizens. By 1931, the number of Greeks living in Tunis was estimated at 463 (Kazdaghi 2007a, 344). Since the numbers in the Greek community remained stable, between 1920 and 1930, more than half of the Greeks residing in Tunis acquired the French citizenship. The law of 1923 also affected the Greeks who resided in Sfax, a major port in the south of Tunis where Greeks settled in the 1880s. During the 1930s, the majority of the Greeks who lived in Sfax were naturalised as French citizens. As a result, the local Greek community included 283 Greek nationals and about 500 French (Fayçal El Ghoul 2000, 140). This situation led to a split between those who maintained their Greek citizenship and originated mainly from mainland Greece and those who originated from the Dodecanese and became French citizens. This phenomenon caused serious divisions within the Greek community institutions and redefined the ethnic identity of its members.

The French policy affected also the operation of the Greek community's institutions. In effect, it created upheavals in some key areas and resulted in a period of legal disputes that led the community to an economic decline and the threat of disintegration. Although the Greek community of Tunisia dated back to 1647, the "Regulation of Greek Community of Tunis" was approved by the General Meeting of the members of the community in Tunis on 01/08/1888, but wasn't implemented until 1898. It was legislated initially by the Greek state by the Royal Decree of 7/9/1888 and subsequently by the new Royal Decree of 3/2/1898. The original Articles of Association of 1888 were modified in order to align it with the requirements of the French authorities who had requested that all clubs

and associations in Tunisia hand in their statutes for approval (Journal Officiel Tunisien, 15/9/1888).

At the beginning of the 20th century, changes in the anthropogeography of the Greek community led to a revision in the Articles of Association. According to the original Articles, only the Greeks who originated either from the Greek Kingdom or the regions that were still part of the Ottoman Empire were considered to be community members. However, when a few members became French citizens, it was necessary that the Articles of Association be adapted². In 1908, the new Articles of Association were prepared by a committee that consisted of the General Consul, Al. Varatousos, the president of the Greek community of Tunis, N. Theriopsaris and several community members including N. Economou, P. Michopoulos, N. Derelas, D. Kougioutopoulos, Al. Siganakis, P. Pontikis, El. Tourasis and I. Eski. According to these new Articles of Association, citizens of any nationality who felt Greek, were Christian Orthodox and resided in Tunisia for at least two years could be registered in the Greek community³. The new Articles of Association were approved by the community's general meeting on 11/05/1908.

Nevertheless, in 1909, the community faced new problems regarding the conditions of membership in the community. During a general assembly that took place before the election procedure, the Greek Consul defended the right of Greek-origin French citizens to vote as long as they would sign a declaration stating that they considered themselves as "children of Greece".⁴ The assembly eventually agreed and these French citizens voted. However, the elections that followed triggered a new crisis. Candidates that were not elected turned to the courts and filed lawsuits claiming that the elections were based on Articles of Association

² Archive of the Greek community in Tunis, "Proceedings of 1902-1910", Nr. 80/ 10-3-1908.

³ Archive of the Greek community in Tunis, "Proceedings of 1902-1910", Nr. 80/10-3-1908.

⁴ Archive of the Greek community in Tunis, "Proceedings of 1902-1910", Nr. 85/18-4-1909.

that were not recognised by the French protectorate. The trial lasted until 1912 and only then were the elections of 1909 pronounced legal. This decision led two members of the community council, N. Theriopsaris and P. Kougioutopoulos, to resign blaming the General Consul for illegal interference⁵. Finally, although the new Articles of Association were approved by the Greek state in 1909, they were also reviewed by the community on 20/02/1912 (Greek Government Gazette, Nr. 238/15-10-1909).

From the middle of the 1930s, the Greek community experienced the effects of the French policy aimed at the gradual assimilation of different nationalities living in Tunisia. Since many Greeks acquired French citizenship, the Greek community encountered an unprecedented crisis of identity. In 1928, community members were divided into two parts. The first group consisted of those who were naturalised French and the second were those who retained Greek citizenship. Their disagreement on the community council's management policy, regarding property issues and the problems derived from the existing Articles of Association, led to a new conflict. According to the Articles of Association that were in use, only Greek nationals were considered to be community members. However, things had radically changed within the community.

Because of this underlying crisis, on 16/2/1930, a quarrel between the community council elected in May of 1928 and three ex-members of the council administration broke out. These three members participated in the community administration committee between 1910 and 1928 and were accused of mismanagement. The charges related to management decisions in three transactions that had the effect of prejudicing the community. The accused

⁵ Archive of the Greek community in Tunis, "Proceedings of 1902-1910", Nr. 91/1- 5/1909.

members counterattacked, highlighting irregularities in the election procedure, such as the exclusion from voting of members who had acquired French citizenship. At this time, the Patriarch of Alexandria decided to get involved in order to avert the disintegration of the community (Patriarchate of Alexandria 1933, 132). He travelled to Tunisia and was welcomed by the Patriarchal representative, the Archimandrite Anthimos Rosmaris, the Bureau of the community and the officers of the Greek women's association (Patriarchate of Alexandria 1933, 129). The crisis within the Greek community was so deep that two separate community representative committees met with the Patriarch (Pieridis 1955, 22). As the Archimandrite Rosmaris characteristically reported "during the Patriarch's visit in 1931, the Greeks of Tunisia had lost touch with everything that characterised Greek culture and could hardly speak Greek" (Pieridis 1955, 20-21).

A few days later, the general meeting of 31/07/1931 decided to appoint a temporary administrative board consisting of six members, to issue a new set of Articles of Association and to review the financial control of the last three years' administration. As a result, a seven-member administration committee was appointed and was responsible to review the financial decisions taken during the previous years⁶. However, these initiatives disregarded both the legal status of the French protectorate and the feelings of many Tunisian Greeks who regarded the Patriarch's involvement to be inappropriate. These members, using a legal route, made an attempt to cancel the new Articles of Association and to prevent the Patriarch from controlling the community's assets. According to the court resolution that was issued on 20/02/1932, the new administration board had the

⁶ Archive of the Greek community in Tunis, "Proceedings of 1930-1939", Nr.1/ 4-8-1931.

right to amend the Articles of Association and to proceed to elections within one semester (Journal Officiel Tunisien, 27/2/1932). Nevertheless, internal disputes continued. Meanwhile, in February 1932, the Patriarch Meletios proceeded in the reconstitution of the Metropolis of Cartagena that had the pastoral care of the Greeks residing in Tunisia, with the new Bishop, Konstantinos Katsarakis holding the position of chairman of the community. Moreover, the new administration tried to modify the Articles of Association, making the community a religious association, chaired by the respective Bishop.

After a number of meetings, the Bishop of Cartagena assured the Greeks that community assets were not endangered. As a result, the revised Articles of Association were approved at the meeting of 29/05/1932. According to these articles, the Bishop of Cartagena was now the chairman of the community board. However, the new Articles of Association also had to be approved by the French authorities in order to be valid. Meanwhile, some members of the community board who were French citizens and were opposed to Bishop's initiatives, took the initiative to submit new Articles of Association for approval. In August 1932, four members of the board resigned, causing a new disruption within the community which was divided into two opposing parts. At the end of summer and after the French intervention, the role of the Bishop was limited to a religious function. Although the Patriarchate of Alexandria made an appeal to the courts, it failed to alter the decision of the French authorities. Ultimately, the new Articles of Association entered into force on 28/12/1932 (Journal Officiel Tunisien, 28/12/1932).

After a long period of conflict and mismanagement, which led the community to lose a significant part of its revenue and the local church to be

closed, since there was no permanent priest, the Greek community returned to normality. In March 1933, I. Manzounis, a second-generation Greek French citizen, who voluntarily fought for the French army during the Second World War, was elected president of the Greek community of Tunis. Meantime, the temple resumed operation with the arrival of Archimandrite D. Langouvardos and the community's economic status gradually improved. The presence of Manzounis coincided with the complete assimilation of the Greek community by the French. Manzounis brought back solidarity and prosperity to the Greek community. However, he did nothing to preserve the Greek identity. Kazdaghli characteristically reported that Manzounis did not speak even a word of Greek. He did not want to learn Greek since he was closer to the French mentality (Kazdaghli 2007b).

In addition to its impact on the Greek community's internal affairs, the French colonial policy in Tunisia also affected the operation of Greek schools. Since a majority of the Greeks had acquired French citizenship, they preferred their children to be educated in French schools. As a result, there was no organized effort towards the establishment of a Greek school within the community. As a result, during the 1930s, the majority of second and third generation Greeks could hardly speak Greek. The assimilation of the Greeks was so complete that the steering committee of the community exclusively used the French language in its correspondence, even with the Greek Foreign Ministry or the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Both Patriarch Meletios II in 1929⁷ and Patriarch Christopher II in 1940⁸ were highly critical of this development. This fondness for the language of

⁷Archive of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, Letter of Patriarch Meletios II to N. Mavrogiannopoulos, president of the Greek community of Tunis, Nr. 229/28-1-1929.

⁸Archive of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, Letter of Christopher II to I. Manzounis, president of the Greek community of Tunis, Nr. 55/9-1-1940.

the ruling elite must have been derived, at least in part, from the French colonial policy which imposed the French language and culture in an effort to assimilate and incorporate foreign communities residing in Tunisia.

Conclusion

The Greek presence in Tunisia dates back to the middle of the 16th century. During the 18th century they took control of the external trade and they gradually dominated the economic and social life of Tunis. The economic prosperity and the excellent relations with the Tunisian political leadership, until the late 19th century, allowed the Greeks to preserve their ethnic identity.

The transformation of the Tunisian hegemony to a French protectorate in 1881 and the gradual reorganisation of the state structures in the early part of the 20th century brought about a radical shift in the character of the Greek community. The French policies in Tunisia, themselves largely determined by the competition of the European powers in both the European and the African geographical spheres, gradually subjected the Greek community of Tunisia to the consequences of this new political status quo. The French colonial policy systematically guided the majority of the European residents of Tunisia towards the gaining of French citizenship. The impact of the French policy, contained in the decrees of 1887 to 1910, would have been negligible for the Greek community.

As the size of the French community technically expanded between 1920 and 1930, the interrelations between the ethnic communities of Tunisia changed.

The policy of assimilation through naturalisation laws had an enormous influence within the Greek community. The law of 1923 led to a split between those who maintained their Greek citizenship and those who became French citizens. This phenomenon caused serious divisions within the Greek community institutions and redefined the ethnic identity of its members. The French policy affected also the operation of the Greek community's institutions and resulted in a period of legal disputes that led the community to an economic decline and the threat of disintegration. Overall, the influence of French policies was catalytic, with the result that the majority of European residents of Tunisia substituted their native language for French.

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